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# PERFUME HOLDER

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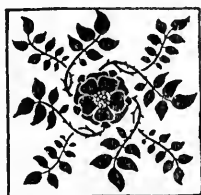




## THE PERFUME-HOLDER



THE PERFUME- ~  
~ ~ ~ ~ HOLDER  
A PERSIAN LOVE POEM  
BY CRAVEN LANGSTROTH  
BETTS ~ ~ ~ ~ ~



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## THE PERFUME-HOLDER.

**F**AIR Naishápúr, two hundred years ago,  
Then free and prosperous from the Turkish foe,  
Like a bright jewel out of Allah's hand  
Lay gleaming in the green Khorassan land.  
Far to the east, the insidious desert soil  
Strangled the verdure with its sandy coil,  
But north and south, the languorous noon-day breeze  
Waved the light leaves of lime and cypress trees  
Across the hills, within whose broken row  
The city glimmered in the vale below.  
Along the road that led from Ispahan  
Was heard the tinkling of the caravan,  
Trailing its dusty, sinuous passage down  
Unto the market of the wealthy town.

Piercing the hot and dazzling ether through  
A hundred minarets burned against the blue.  
The purple roofs of mosques, to Summer's smiles,  
Flashed all their panoply of porcelain tiles,  
While from their walls the names of Allah shone,  
In many a bold and quaint device of stone.  
Color and light cast everywhere their glow  
Among the booths and houses, row on row;  
It flamed from off the palace court-yard flags,  
And blazoned even the cringing beggar's rags.  
The ponds and fountains glittering steely-cold  
The sun's keen alchemy changed to liquid gold,  
And marble cupolas and awnings white  
Flashed in full splendour of reflected light,  
While green pomegranate leaf and pregnant vine  
Caught deeper lustre from the ethereal shine.  
Teeming with fierce and palpitating heat,  
The sunbeams wove their network o'er the street,  
And gleamed along the cream-white painted walls  
Of gardens and the roofs of market stalls,  
And showered a mist of yellow radiance down  
O'er hill and valley, desert, wood, and town.

**T**WAS noon in Naishápúr—the gay bazaars  
Heaped with their wares from 'neath ten thousand  
stars

One ant-like, vast, conglomerate market made,  
Cross-scored with throbbing avenues of trade.  
But yet the hum of traffic even there  
Hushed at the high Muezzin's call to prayer,  
And too oppressive was the stare of day  
For active toil along the market way.  
Some moments longer surged the stir and bruit  
Around the coffee stalls and booths of fruit,  
A moment longer did the merchant stop  
To close the little shutters of his shop,  
Then in his slippers homeward hurried fast  
To mid-day prayer and the noon's brief repast.  
In the brass-workers' noisy bright bazaar  
Stilled was the chaffering and the hammers' jar,  
And silence, with its solemn, reverent grace,  
Softly down spreading from reposeful space,  
Rested an hour upon the market-place.

**O**NE man, a poor artificer of brass,  
Stirs not as forth the hurrying vendors pass;

But soon as stillness rests upon the street,  
Springs from his cross-legged posture to his feet,  
Puts by the lantern he had shaped that day,  
Looks up and down the cleared, deserted way,  
Takes down the bowl of curds and loaf of bread  
That stand upon a shelf above his head,  
Hooks up a curtain o'er the narrow space  
Which forms his doorway to the market-place,  
Casts one more look along the farther wall,  
Then hides himself behind the portal shawl.





NE might have heard within that curtain soon  
A tapping through the hot and quiet noon;  
A strange man this—'tis sure for greed of gain  
He doth at work the noontide hour remain;  
It was his custom — no one notice took;  
He was to all a strange and sealèd book;  
No one came near him but to buy or sell;  
They named him Selim the Unsociable.  
That any one should think it worth his care  
Why the brass-worker spent his hour of prayer  
Behind his curtain, save for closer shade,  
Had never on his fellows' minds been laid.

It well might seem that for such watchful heed  
Was little use; — for there was naught, indeed,  
Save vagrant dogs along the shining track,  
Sleeping like pious Moslems, in a pack,  
Snarling in dream, because the heated bricks  
Smote them in poignant fancy like the kicks  
Of Allah's Faithful—snapped their jaws in pain,  
Then rolling over stretched their limbs again.

**B**UT there came one who in that quiet street  
Listened intently to the hammer's beat;  
You might have marked him by his furtive eye  
A man of cunning, dangerous, shrewd, and sly;  
At Selim's booth he made a sudden stand,  
Lifted the curtain with a stealthy hand  
And peered within—a single ray of light  
Flashed up a marvellous work upon his sight;  
For, rested Selim's bended knees between,  
Glowing with new and richest coppery sheen,  
Engrossed with scrolls of purest arabesque,  
A perfume-holder, airily grotesque,  
Wrought all of brass, pierced round with lace designs  
And burnished fine between the mottoed lines;

A miracle of rare and patient art  
Informed by genius working from the heart,  
Such as might hold the incense at the shrine  
Of Allah or of Mahomet the Divine:—  
One might forego all sense except the eyes  
To be possessed of such a wondrous prize.

OU in the misty amethystine West  
Know not with what a rare and pungent zest  
The Persian in his drier purer air  
Values his perfume even as his prayer.  
The perfume-holder—an effeminate whim  
To you—holds yet an honored place with him:  
Scatter within it but some glowing coals,  
Lo! from the brazier forth the perfume rolls,  
Like the warm incense of the votive breath  
From lovers' lips as they unclothe in death!

O lie awake in one bliss-haunted dream  
Where leaves are rustling and where fountains gleam,  
Within a cool and lustrous colonnade,  
While near, some large-eyed, love-enchanted maid  
Leans, lily crowned, against a marble jar,



Caressing languidly her light guitar,  
Her fingers glancing o'er the shimmering strings  
Like play of moonbeams on soft bubbling springs,  
Wooing the soul of melody divine  
From murmuring streams and groves of haunted pine,  
Her bosom heaving to the waves of sound  
That have in one delicious languor drowned  
The outer sense, leaving the spirit free  
To revel in a swoon-like ecstasy—  
And then to watch the perfume vapor curl  
With many a slender and fantastic swirl  
Swung through the vibrant music, till the air  
Loaded with tinkling sounds and odors rare  
Filters soul-deep within the fleshly mail,  
Till, rapt, escaping from the body's jail,  
The spirit issuing through its portal flies  
To fairy realms of wonder and surmise—  
That were indeed a taste of Paradise!


**B**UT with no thought of this the sordid spy  
Cast on the masterpiece his curious eye.  
He was a merchant, trained in every guile  
Of trade—to fawn, to browbeat, and to smile

Careful to hold in every scheme he tried  
Of fraud or rapine law upon his side.  
His talon fingers in their trembling clutch  
Pulled back the shadowing curtain overmuch,  
And Selim, of his presence made aware,  
Looked up and met the stranger's cunning stare  
And frowned to note the hard and vulture trace  
Of avarice on the man's ill-omened face.  
The other answered with a smile compressed:  
"Has Allah, O Selim, made the time of rest  
Too long, or has he given too short a day,  
That thus you work the noontide hour away?"  
But Selim threw his head back at the word,  
For all distasteful was the voice he heard,  
Like some proud courser that with action grand  
Tosses aside a strange caressing hand,  
And answered, "Little rest doth surely lie  
With him, O merchant, who with prying eye  
Looks either in the day-time or at night  
On that which others fain would keep from sight,  
Which none concerns. To question not were best,  
Whether I work at mid-day or I rest."

**H**E set aside the work of perfect art  
And waited for the stranger to depart,  
Who turned his furtive, greedy glance upon  
The perfume-holder ever and anon.  
He named a price, but Selim shook his head;  
That special thing was not for sale, he said.  
The other, following his practised guile,  
Answered again with unbelieving smile,  
He had a friend named Marco, from the north,  
Who, buying works of art, had ventured forth  
From Venice even to the farthest East,  
Would give the price of many a lordly feast  
For such a thing as this, if he would sell:—  
But Selim no persuasion might compel  
To barter; wrathful that he still was pressed,  
He locked his treasure in a cedar chest,  
Then urged upon the merchant one by one  
The less inspired works that he had done—  
They were but few,—till forth the stranger went  
And left him in his solitude content.

**T**HE merchant paused when he was out of sight  
Of Selim's booth, his face with passion white,

With fingers clenched and with a frowning brow  
He seemed to register some mental vow.  
The swart Egyptian boy who stood before  
A rich brass-dealer's widely swinging door,  
Watched, with a keen and curious surmise  
The knavish purpose in the stranger's eyes,  
For every pantomimic act betrayed  
Insatiate greed—the reckless lust of trade.


 STRIDENT voice came calling from afar  
The new-born hour—at once the clattering jar  
Of hammers rose again upon the air;  
The craftsmen hurried to the busy fair,  
And through its alleys poured the human flood  
Like buzzing bees a-swarm within a wood.  
But Selim, in his resting hour intent  
And keenly active, languid now was bent  
Above his tinkering, as though toil had grown  
Distasteful to him since the noon had flown.  
His hammer strokes less eager, blow on blow,  
Fell on the brass, grew slower and more slow,  
And once he clasped his brow convulsive-wise,  
As though it ached, and hid his downcast eyes.

**I**T was a hot and glaring afternoon;  
The hum in the bazaar like a bassoon  
Grew constant—presently a shout of throngs  
Came booming with the beat of drums and gongs,  
While now and then the fitful snorting blast  
Of trumpets on the echoing air was cast.  
The shuffling sound of many slippered feet  
Came like a wind-gust down the dusty street;  
The loiterers left their seats beneath the walls,  
Lured by the shouts and noisy trumpet calls;  
The loud-tongued barter, with the hammering clashed,  
Was stilled as by the glittering pageant flashed.  
The last Shah's eldest son, 'twas bruited wide,  
Was riding to the mosque to wed his bride,  
Next to the Shah the first of Persian land  
And named *The-Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand*;  
Yet, for his mother was of humble strain,  
Who might not as an heir the throne attain.

**B**UT Selim, hooded in his changeless thought,  
Scarce heard the tattle which the gossips brought;  
None sought to pass an easy word with him;  
They deemed his silence but a surly whim.

He, heeding little what was thought or said  
So that they left him quiet, in his head  
Kept turning, like the burden of a swoond,  
One memory that coiled his mind around.  
He let the lantern uncompleted stand  
And from the little finger of his hand—  
His left hand—with a pensive, wistful look,  
He carefully a linen bandage took,  
And this unwound, a tiny hammered thing  
Of brass which bound his finger like a ring  
Was shown, round which the tissue angry red,  
Twinged fitfully as bit the figured shred.  
He wet the cloth, replaced it; and a chime  
Of thoughts went swinging backward to the time  
When she, the idol of his heart, had stept  
Across the doorway where his wares were kept,  
And in a careless, blithely-mocking vein,  
Had given him this little cirque of pain.  
Ay, he remembered, how upon that morn  
He felt with ecstasy his soul was born,  
How he had gazed with flushed and rapt surprise  
Upon her lissome form and laughing eyes,  
Fairer than houri to the bosom pressed

Of Mahomet in the regions of the blest.  
Except her eyes, which glittered each a star,  
Her face was veiled, as in the white cymar  
She glided through the market and by chance  
Caught the obeisance and adoring glance  
Of Selim, sitting cross-legged in his booth;  
And as she saw the passion tide of youth  
Sweep to his eyes, she smiled and oft again  
Returned him salutation—now and then,  
Paused for some moments at his little stall,  
And then coquettishly, by letting fall  
Some corner of her veil, like hide and seek,  
Disclosed the rounded contour of her cheek  
Of ripening olive, like the moon in mist,  
And blush-rose lips that pouted to be kissed.

 ONE day—'twas one of two such happy days  
As star perhaps a lifetime—through the ways  
She came to visit Selim and to buy  
Some trinkets of his patient industry.  
Lingering she stayed an hour; made him tell  
The way he wrought the brass; with playful spell  
She drew from him the use of lead and pitch;

She took the die and punch and made him teach  
Her hand to cut the ductile metal through;  
One little die she held, 'twas virgin new—  
A tiny whorl the pattern was—she tried  
It on a strip of brass, and he, to hide  
Her slender fingers from a missing blow,  
Shielded them with his stouter hand, and so,  
As once the stroke she missed, and still again,  
He joyed to think for her he suffered pain.  
At length she gave him back the die—he swore  
With truthful look no one should use it more  
Except himself, and he but on a gift  
For her. Her lustrous laughing eyes were lift  
To Selim's face, as doubting, then with care  
Mocking his earnestness, she told him where  
An aged kinsman dwelt, whence he might take  
The present he intended her to make.  
Then into childlike playfulness did pass  
Her mood; she took a tiny shred of brass,  
And twisting it with pincers in a ring  
Round Selim's finger tightly, tried to bring,  
Mischievously, across the strong man's face  
A wince, but failed, and smiling left the place.



**A**ND Selim, never from that hour at rest,  
Had shrined her lovely image in his breast.

A few more times, as she had done before,  
She to the market passed his open door;  
But though his eyes with loving hunger sued,  
That one sweet meeting never was renewed.  
Now all his purpose to one issue ran:  
Upon that day he straight for her began  
The perfume-holder, lavished his fond heart  
Upon it; for it eased him of his smart  
To feel he wrought her service and to see  
Its beauty growing like a stately tree,  
Rooted in art, as with the tiny whorl  
He would its richly shining round impearl  
With wheels of light that glimmered on the view,  
Fashioned to let the writhing pungent through.  
For him she had one name and only one;  
As with each noon the precious work was done,  
He muttered as he placed with care apart  
The gift, "'tis for The-Star-of-Selim's-Heart."  
The star that lighted up the lonely sky  
Of his rapt spirit and then passed him by.

**A**ND now 'twas finished—every tiny scroll  
Was perfect—but the work in Selim's soul  
Went ever onward like the incessant beat  
Within his hearing, through the mid-day heat,  
Of hammers in their tinkling changeless chime  
Dinning industrious symphony to time.

**H**E took the punch-like tool, the slender die  
That formed the whorl, and with a saddened eye  
Defaced the pattern with his file and cast  
The useless steel upon the street, then passed  
His hand across his forehead as in pain,  
And took the unfinished lantern up again.

**B**UT while he worked a warm Elysian dream  
Fell o'er him like the sunset's dying gleam.  
Upon the wings of passion forth he flew  
To meet her where he'd held her oft to view  
In fancy, all unknown to her; he thought  
(Such strangeness in a dream is often wrought)  
That she was now the seeker—he was—where?  
He did not know, he did not seem to care—  
But down the eddying current of his swoond

There came some one and told him she had found  
The perfume-holder—and then he straightway  
Became the perfume-holder, and she lay  
Caressing hand upon it and did speak  
It fair and pressed it with her velvet cheek,  
Letting her silk of hair, a shining pall,  
Like Allah's blessing, o'er its richness fall.  
Then for one moment, through the hammered brass  
He felt his soul, the soul of Selim, pass  
And thrill unto the magic of her touch;  
The moment flitted—then came voices such  
As Allah sends to true believers when  
He tells them of the crooked ways of men,  
That called, "O Selim! where is Selim?" soon  
A voice made answer in a pleasant tune,  
"I will find Selim, for I know him by  
The ache within his finger;" then the sky  
Was clouded with the sorrows, sighs, and pains  
Of every soul that on the earth remains,  
And forthwith went the form that held the voice  
Among them, making from them all the choice  
She knew was Selim's pain; with that began  
By the dream process, building up a man

Like Selim, out of things that half-time fell  
And crumbled in the falling; but the spell  
Kept on till all was finished, head to feet;  
Then, for one moment, Selim was complete,  
Sitting in the bazaar, his right hand laid  
Upon his hammer and the lantern stayed  
Between his knees—but nowhere now was seen  
The-Star-of-Selim's-Heart—naught but the sheen  
Of brass-ware, and the crowd that thronged again  
The market, talking of the marriage train.

**T** WAS but a moment more—and the bazaar  
Vanished again—upon an ivory car  
He sat, the lovely lady by his side,  
And she was wreathed with roses like a bride,  
Starred all with jewels like the milky-way,  
Or fair as dew-fall in the early ray  
Of morning;—like the Shah's, his kaftan white  
Blazed with a diamond, one deep fount of light  
A Peri's tear-drop—and thus forth they rode  
Midst cheers that wave on wave around them flowed,  
Drawn by a gold and crimson harnessed span  
Of cream-white horses, such as at Ispahan


The Shah drives slowly on great days of state,  
Sitting in pomp of sovereignty sedate.  
Flowers rained upon them, and their coursers' feet  
Trod cloth of gold, as down the echoing street  
They moved unto their bridal—till a band  
With him, The-Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand,  
Met them, and a tumult thence arose—  
For he, the prince, had claimed the bride—and blows  
Were struck to blood . . . as Selim wounded lay,  
His jewel and his bride were borne away.

**A**GAIN the vision changed—his memory fought  
Against oblivion—he remembered what  
Still made his finger ache—and she again  
Was with him on a wild and lonesome plain.  
A ponderous iron mace was in his hand;  
Like mighty Rustem did he forward stand,  
All husked in mail, and a tremendous boss  
Of burnishd brass his aching arm across  
Held up; a company of devils roared  
Against him, and amidst the evil horde  
Two Satans, fierce and hideous to view  
As that White Demon god-like Rustem slew.

But the sweet lady far too much for fear  
Loved him; she came his wounded hand anear  
And kissed it, and the white Satans roared in scorn  
Upon him, and his sinewy breast was torn  
With passion, and he heaved his mace in air,  
And rushing forward did for fight prepare.

**T**HEN suddenly he woke—his finger's pain  
Aroused him—he was in his stall again,  
A poor brass-worker, his bright visions flown,  
Unloved, ignoble, downcast, and alone.  
A laughing crowd their jeers upon him kept,  
For he had moved and muttered as he slept;  
And foremost, as the laughter rippled long,  
The crafty merchant stood amidst the throng.  
He spake—"O Selim, your brave dreams must spin,  
From poppy-head, or some old potent bin  
Of wine of Shiraz! Those who hashish eat,  
Go thus like fakirs through the crowded street  
More strange adventures than were ever sung  
By great Firdusi of the silver tongue."  
And then continued, while the mirth ran high  
And Selim gathered courage to reply—

'I too can dream, but not of ladies' lips  
And battle, but of merchandise and ships;  
For as in sleep I rested this mid-day,  
I dreamed that Selim came and straight did say,  
"I have a perfume-holder here—'tis thine,  
If thou wilt give me silver pieces nine;  
Sell it to Marco, if thou seest fit  
And let us both a profit make from it.'  
I see my Selim sitting in his booth—  
Say, has my vision spoken to me truth?"

"O perfume-holder have I here for you,"  
Said Selim, "all I sell is in your view."  
The crafty merchant made him this repeat,  
With guileful purpose, to the crowded street.  
Still, once more he began—"But dreams are sent  
From Allah"—"Some are, not yours"—Selim bent  
His eye upon him, "I have these to sell;  
If you have wish to purchase, it is well,  
You shall have value straight and good; I need  
Money to-morrow—make no further plead;  
If of my wares you want not, forthwith cease,  
And leave me, in the Name of Whom be Peace."

**A**T length the merchant bought of Selim's art  
With greed, yet loathing with his coin to part;  
Then took his leave, and Selim, richer grown  
By a few silver coins, could call his own  
Nothing for sale, save where neglected lay  
The unfinished lantern—now he worked away  
Upon it fiercely, as though by this his thought  
Might cease its whispering, or Time be brought  
To mend his pace—and till the market gate  
Was ready to be closed he lingered late  
At work, when rising, with what anxious care  
He fastened tight the little shutters where  
The treasured gift, his pride and solace stood!  
Then wandered forth in an unquiet mood.


**T**HAT night, uneasy dreams without surcease  
Assailed his spirit, robbed him of his peace.  
That one short night seemed fraught with danger more  
Than all the hundred nights that went before  
When he his treasure in the chest had kept  
In the deserted market-place; he slept  
But little, now that once he surely knew  
Another lusted for it; on he threw



His clothes, and aimless wandered up and down  
The winding streets and alleys of the town;  
Still ever coming where his treasure lay  
Behind the palisades which blocked the way  
To the brass-workers' moonlit, still bazaar:—  
The savage dogs, come baying from afar,  
Leaped at the gate which held 'twixt them and him  
As though they fain had torn him limb from limb.  
A watchman with his lantern, on his round,  
Drew near, attracted by the barking sound,  
Looked at him, knew him, and passed elsewhere—  
While he with steadfast eyes kept gazing there  
Between the bars, toward where the shadow fell  
Across his shop—a lonely sentinel.  
Thus constantly until the dawn of day,  
He lived the weary hours of night away.

**S**CARCE did the market barriers open drop,  
Than he again was hammering in his shop  
At the unfinished lantern. He next took down  
The perfume-holder; wrapped it, that the town  
Might not view what he carried; then returned  
All quickly home, and with the silver earned,

Adorned himself in splendid, rich array  
As though it were for some high holiday;  
Tied with deft care the perfume-holder too,  
Within a silken cloth of creamy hue  
In which he placed a scented billet, writ  
In flowing verses when some rhyming fit  
Had seized his spirit in the cool midnight—  
A skilled calligrapher did it indite  
With many a courteous phrase of love profound—  
And all was with a flowery border bound.

ET me paint Selim's portrait, as he stands  
The perfume-holder lifted in his hands,  
All garnished fair and ready for his part  
Of service to the mistress of his heart.  
The full fresh turban of white hand-wove stuff,  
Embroidered with a glittering thread of buff,  
A high topped hat of yellow camlet winds;  
Beneath, a snow-white linen skull-cap binds  
His temples with a narrow line, gleams fair  
Above his bronzed face and coal-black hair;  
His head is straight, symmetric, small of size,  
Alert as any steed's, and his dark eyes

Are lustrous like a steed's; an eager grace  
Dwells in the outlines of his mobile face;  
The lips are proudly set, the nostrils fine,  
The features delicate and aquiline,  
Surmounted by a wealth of crispy locks;  
His tunic, brightened by the mazy flox,  
Is like the turban white, and doth unfold  
Now here or there the waving lines of gold;  
A knife-case in the silken shawl is placed,  
Which winds with graceful fold his slender waist  
No statelier nor braver youth to see  
From Shiraz to Khorassan is than he!

**T**HE messenger he won to his emprise  
Was an old woman, good, discreet, and wise;  
But ask me not the look, as he did place  
His love-gift in her hands, of Selim's face,  
Or while he watched her dragging steps depart  
To her the one fixed Star-of-Selim's-Heart.  
He lingered there, while soul and visage burned,  
Waiting until the ancient dame returned.  
Some hours later, back she came at last.  
There was no need to question her, he cast

One look within her hands, where she did lift  
Mutely toward his view the unopened gift,  
Then said, "The lady, by the Shah's command,  
Married The-Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand."

**T**HEN Selim bowed his head, and in that place  
A death-like pallor smote him in the face.  
He tottered toward the door as though in years,  
Pierced by a grief that struck too deep for tears.  
Holding in numb embrace the brazen jar  
He found himself again in the bazaar,  
The while with quivering lips, distractedly,  
He whispered texts of old philosophy,  
Striving for consolation; but no heed  
He gave them:—ah, how often in our need,  
When earth is black beneath the blackened skies,  
They fail, these peaceful sayings of the wise!

**Y**ET through his agony was woven a tune  
Of words that clogged his tongue and like a rune  
Beat dull reiteration in his brain  
And mingled with his bitter flow of pain:

*"WHETHER at Naishápúr or Babylon,  
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter run,  
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,  
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one."*

**T**HESE were the words of one in Selim's town,  
Whose mighty spirit had brought high renown  
To Persian land from every land abroad;  
In Naishápúr they held him like a god;  
He knew the amazing portents of the stars,  
But yet his soul, foiled at life's prison bars,  
Testing the hollowness of earthly state,  
Mocked sadly at irrevocable fate,  
And, spite of all he had by genius won,  
Took up the olden tale of Solomon,  
Chanting the dreary burden o'er again,  
"'Tis vain—the life we live, like death, is vain!"

**A**ND Selim turned to work, because he felt  
His reason totter as he slowly spelt  
The import of the blow upon his soul;—  
In work, unceasing work, he might control  
The sickness at his heart, and so, alas!

Might help the miserable days to pass.  
He had forgot or had not cared to change  
His holiday vestments; down the lengthened range  
Of the bazaar the whole brass-working tribe  
Broke forth upon him with loud laugh and gibe,  
That bit not like the fangs of anguish grim,—  
Yet like a swarm of gnats they worried him;  
Longing to be alone, his soul felt wronged  
As round his path the coarse mechanics thronged  
With mock obeisance, gestures rude, uncouth,  
Jeering, as they pursued him to his booth—  
For little love they bore him. Taunt him well!  
Was he not Selim the Unsociable,  
Too proud to mingle with his equals there?  
They crowded close to see how he would stare  
(For a surprise awaited him) as he,  
Drunk with despair's unmanning ecstasy,  
Unto his small store plodded heavily.

**H**IS booth was plundered—all his wares were gone!  
And worse—his tools! he could not think upon  
Their loss; their value was not great, but dear  
Almost as were his fingers;—misery drear

Settled upon him; only now remained  
The unfinished lantern, but deformed and stained,  
As though the plunderer held its value light  
And set his heel upon it out of spite.

**H**E sat a long time in his little shop  
Without a motion, with his head a-prop  
Upon his hands, a ruined man, bereft  
Of all he held most dear; to him was left,  
When he a little cleared his mind to think,  
And reason halted upon madness' brink,  
Only the gift returned which he still held,  
The perfume-holder; he will be compelled  
To purchase bread and tools; now he will go  
And from the merchant buy a lease of woe.

**A** BLURR and deafness fell on eye and ear—  
Confused him—nor his senses grew more clear  
Till he before the merchant took his stand,  
The precious piece of brass within his hand.  
The place he looked upon with goods was rich;  
Fine armor blazed from many a stand and niche;  
Sabres from Samarcand and costly shawls

From Indian looms were hanging on the walls,  
And Orient ivories, carvings from the Isles,  
Within their lacquered cabinets stood in files.  
The shelves were heaped with stuffs of rich brocade;  
Mirrors of steel with silver frames inlaid  
With jewels, glittering daggers, hookahs fine,  
And all the costly wares of Levantine  
And Indian markets, crowded all the space.  
As Selim gazed with wonder round the place  
Coarse faces covered him with leering scan,  
Fit tools of service to the sordid man  
Whose slaves they were, and downcast Selim felt  
The transient courage he had groped for melt  
Clean from his heart—his one despondent thought  
Made desolation—all things 'gainst him wrought  
A vast conspiracy—for the merchant now  
Began with smiling and contemptuous brow  
To scorn, to cheapen, and to vilify  
That he had been so eager once to buy;  
Then asking Selim what his need might be,  
He told him he would take as surety  
The handiwork and lend him; sadly then  
Said Selim, "I need brass and tools again



To carry on my trade." The merchant's smile  
Changed to a cold and stealthy look of guile  
As forth he brought a well-assorted pack  
Of half-worn tools; but Selim started back—  
Then clutched—the things were his! faintness did seize  
Upon him and he felt his spirit freeze  
And shrivel; distant, indistinct, and small  
Looked all things round him—darkness seemed to fall.  
He was not sure he had been telling how  
The tools were his, or still quite calmly now  
That they were stolen from him, or that dumb  
He had been standing, deathlike, dazed, and numb.  
Suddenly came the merchant's hateful face  
Close to his own, with horrible grimace;  
Forth sprang two monstrous hands, that straightway lay  
Grasp on his brazen treasure and away  
Bore it in triumph to a distant shelf;  
Then rushed the hot fit on; he flung himself  
In rage against the servants—wildly fought—  
Until his mind a little space was brought  
To hear men's voices dwindling through the dim  
From faces that he knew; one said of him  
After another, Selim's could not be

The perfume-holder—they were sure that he  
Owned nothing of the kind—they knew him well  
And all his work—he yesterday did tell  
He had not such a thing;—and as he strove,  
Struggling, to right-himself, they dragged and drove  
Him forth, and nothing but a blurr was there  
Of dust and pressure, anger and despair.  
Blows rained upon him; one last cruel stroke  
Felled him with torture;—then his spirit broke!

\* \* \* \* \*

**S**HE, who had been to one unhappy heart  
The load-star of its being, sat apart  
In the zenana's silken privacy,  
A married captive, never to be free.  
But o'er The-Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand  
Some time she ruled;—the heart she could command  
Of that fierce fighter in his pleasant mood;—  
A second wife, in sovereign solitude,  
All gave her homage, all her triumph graced,  
Even she, the first wed, whom she had displaced.

**T**HE-Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand at first  
Was courteous and devoted—but he nursed

Higher ambition than in flowers to bind  
His spirit to the rule of one girl mind,  
Howe'er enchanting, for his heart was set  
On deeds of violence; he could ne'er forget  
The zest for blood which followed him from birth;—  
He was a bold, intrepid son of earth,  
A graceful tiger in a leash of silk,  
As mild and pleasant as the cocoa's milk,  
When free from passion, but resolved and strong  
And masterful when purpose swept along  
His rapid tide of mind;—a lion hunt  
In which he ever bore the danger brunt,  
Or thought of some resistless, vengeful raid  
Into Afghanistan, more often swayed  
The councils of his heart, than any charms  
He found within the circle of her arms.  
And she, poor lonely discontented dove,  
Brooded upon it, felt if she in love  
Had been so favored in her lot to fall  
Unto the heart that loved her all in all,  
However lowly, howsoe'er distressed  
By circumstance—by poverty oppressed—  
Life had been happier, shared with such a one,


Than that now passed with this proud monarch's son.  
Unlike the frivolous, tranquil, idle crew  
Who chattered round about her, often grew  
Intolerable to her vivacious mind  
The still zenana—health and spirit pined.  
But came distress far greater when, one day,  
Returning from some distant wide foray  
Into Afghanistan, her husband brought  
A captive home, who now held all his thought.  
The superseded wife grew languid, pale;  
Till—part by some new thought to countervail  
Her weak depression, part, she might consult  
A learned astrologer, whose art occult  
In all that region was most famous—they  
Who lived about her counselled her one day,  
She should a few leagues' distant journey take  
(The sad monotony of her life to break),  
Apost the turquoise hills, and level land  
That fringed the province with its shifting sand.

**P**oor lonely star of one lone heart! some love  
Her soul still yearned for like that heaven above  
The Frankish women sought—she had not dreamed

That it had crossed her;—its pale radiance gleamed  
Athwart her vision through her veil of tears,  
Fairer as grew the distance of the years!  
Bravely again she took life's burden up.  
Hope flowered once more; she had not drained the cup  
Of bitter vintage to its turbid lees.  
She and her escort started as the breeze  
Of early evening swept the scented glades  
And waved the banners o'er long colonnades,  
Ruffled the citron blooms, and filled the air  
With cool perfume and freshness everywhere,  
Rolled like cocoons the streamers of the sky,  
Soothed the hot valleys with its fitful sigh,  
Fluttered the folds of shawls and turbans loose  
And frolicked in the billowy white burnous,  
The heated city fanned with dewy breath,  
And even revived the falt'ring pulse of death!

**S**ERVANTS and slaves upon the camels laid  
The tents and baggage; others were arrayed  
To take the journey, sitting on the packs  
That hung to either side the camels' backs.  
And as a guard, to rearward and before,

Some twenty warriors on their camels bore  
Long lances, sceptres for each humpy throne,  
Like staves of ancient kings in days unknown.

HE camel train from out the gateway passed  
And left the hills behind—then travelled fast  
Across the waste, whose open length was soon  
O'erhung by the large lemon-colored moon.  
The guards from time to time their challenge sent  
To plodding footmen on their passage bent  
Unto the city walls, who straightway told  
Themselves as home-bound miners; they did hold  
A moment (after they the mines had passed),  
A band of all these travellers the last;  
And, at the captain of the train's demand  
Why they were journeying in that lonely land,  
They answered humbly, they had carried out  
Into the distant desert thereabout,  
The corpse of one who had died raving mad  
In prison; stripped the body what it had  
Of worth upon it—now but from their toil,  
With their poor recompense of sordid spoil.  
The captain forward turned his camel's head  
And told his lady what the men had said.

**N**AUGHT further marked their travel; all next day  
They camped—at evening took again their way;  
And when at last arose the second sun  
They left the desert, their long journey done;  
And to the village now their lady brought,  
Where lived the famed astrologer she sought.

**A**FTER some messages had been exchanged,  
A visit for the lady was arranged  
To the astrologer:—his house was small  
And undistinguished; but upon the wall  
Of a rich room where he received his guest,  
A time-piece hung of rarest art; impressed  
With mystic figures stood an astrolabe  
Fine wrought in brass when science was a babe,  
Brought from Egyptian land; an open book  
Lay on a table; in a crypt-like nook  
Were yellow parchments piled. The languid wife  
Wistfully eyed the man of learnèd life;  
A sage sedate—a form of mark and note,  
Where even a beggar in his frowsy coat  
Looks almost like a king—his tall black cap  
And simple flowing robe of woolen nap

Were of the finest, and his brow and eye,  
Majestic, as through gazing on the sky  
And pondering deeply o'er its hidden lore  
He much of its sublime expression wore.  
Full to the waist, wide o'er the massive chest,  
His sable beard swept down his scarlet vest,  
Lending grave dignity and benignant grace  
Unto his lofty form and thoughtful face.  
This saying rose from those who saw him then,  
That "no men should wear beards but Persian men."

**T**HE sad-faced lady, come to seek his aid,  
Took courage as his features she surveyed—  
Calm, courteous, wise, he seemed; she told him all  
Was needful for his science; told the thrall  
And empty hunger of her heart, and, too,  
Briefly her history, for she saw he knew  
Much of the weakness of worn souls, for he  
Was deeply read in the philosophy  
And poetry of Iran and the East,  
And soothed her hungry spirit with a feast  
Of thoughtful phrases culled for counsel by  
Men's souls to comfort life's extremity,



Down from the words of Solomon the Wise  
To the star-gazer poet, he who lies  
In her own city in unfevered rest,  
The burial stones and clods across his breast.

**T**HE words of counsel past, ere she her way  
Took thence, he told her, he the following day  
The issue of his studies of the night  
Would send her. She too watched the twinkling light  
Of stars, that maze-like through the heavens kept  
Mysterious way:—beneath them mortals slept  
As though no seeds of fate within them lay:—  
Keepers of how many secrets they  
Of human hearts, revealers of how few,  
Though they eternal shine upon our view.  
Ah, they did never to her soul impart  
That one had called her “Star-of-Selim’s-Heart!”

**N**EXT morn, in scented silk the missive came:  
*TO the Most High and Honorable Dame,  
Wife of The-Shadow-of-the-Sultan’s-Hand,  
Fairest of all the fair of Persian land!  
In name of Allah, whom the Faithful call  
The Merciful, Victorious, Chief of All ;—*

*The Stars, O Lady, speak the truth, but man  
Not always can their mystic answer scan ;  
Such power seldom is to mortals given ;  
I thrice to-night have read the face of heaven,  
And thrice this answer hath been given to me—*

*“A FLIGHT OF BLACKBIRDS.”*

*May it rest with thee,  
O Lady, to interpret them aright,  
And may they throw upon thy darkness light  
According to thy heart ; and may the peace  
Of Allah, who alone gives souls increase,  
Be shown to thee. This is the prayer devout  
Of him the unworthiest of thy servants ; doubt  
Not He will send thee grace.*

*Written by the hand  
Of Hassan of the Astrolabe, to command.*

**S**HE, taking these words with her, now began  
Her homeward journey, pondering ; still ran  
Her thoughts along one line ; her mind was bent  
Upon the answer of the stars ; it went  
Ever before her like a vision blest,  
Guiding her to the hopeland of her quest.

**I**T was that chill and silent time of night  
Preceding sunrise, ere the dawning light  
Grows creeping on the world; mysterious hour,  
When Azreal comes with all his awful power  
To loose the souls of men and women old  
From out their bodies, and to close enfold  
Their fluttering spirits—beareth them away  
Unto the realms of midnight or of day.

**T**HE camel-train paced slowly; rose the dust  
As each huge foot into the sand was thrust,  
And fell again full quickly, beaten down  
By the damp air; to right and left a frown  
Against the sky betokened hills; the sun  
Above the left ones soon his course to run  
Prepared; the watchful guards from time to time  
Turned in their saddles to behold him climb  
The hill-tops; o'er the desert's darkened gray,  
Ahead of them, the lighter film of day  
Pressed a faint outline; an uneven spur  
Dimly defined against the misty blur,  
Breaking the outline showed them Naishápúr.

**A**S peered the sun's brow o'er the hills again,  
Startled by that or by the camel-train,  
A clamorous flight of birds upon one hand  
Streamed from some object on the distant sand.  
The lady, resting in uneasy sleep,  
Awoke, as o'er her rose the rattling sweep  
Of wings, and from her litter watched them float  
Ominous and black against the heaven remote,  
New lighted by the half-way risen sun,  
Which o'er the pallid sky his splendor spun.  
Back to her mind, as from a written page,  
There rushed the words of the star-gazing sage,  
"A flight of blackbirds"—then she waved her hand  
And gave the captain of the train command  
She must be taken straightway to the spot  
Whence came the birds of omen—but he not  
Without remonstrance did her will, soon day  
Would scourge the desert with his burning ray.  
As moved the slow procession toward the place  
The sun gazed o'er the hill-tops—from his face  
His streaming golden locks were shaken wide  
And swept the landscape upon every side.

“**Q** FAIREST lady,” said the chief, in tones  
Sore vexed, “let Allah hear me, ’tis the bones  
But of a man, one lost or made away  
With in the desert; others for a prey  
Than these same birds have found him; there abides  
With him no coin, nor weapons at his sides.”  
“In name of Allah, Merciful and Just,  
Dismount, some of you men, and straightway thrust  
Around him; search each bit of cloth and bone  
To see if aught about him may be known.”

**U** NWILLINGLY, and cursing the delay  
Unto themselves, they did her wish obey.  
They lifted with their spears each ragged clout  
And with their muskets moved the bones about.

“**N**OTHING, fair lady, nothing,” said the chief,  
Climbing upon the saddle with relief;  
Then set the rest in motion, well content  
To quit their tarrying. To the litter went  
Some minutes after one who lingered late;  
Without a word, but with a smile sedate,  
Handed his lady in a tiny thing


Of white and yellow; round it was a ring  
Or shred of brass, twist tight, that bore along  
Each edge at intervals impression strong,  
Irregular, a little whorl, which she  
Looked at, surmising of its history,  
Holding it in the hollow of her hand  
Some moments, till her memory might expand  
Around it, and revive the distant day  
That she on Selim's finger in her play  
Had twisted it, and limn the constant gaze  
He ever held for her along the ways,  
And all the tender love and rapt surprise  
That lighted up his dark and thoughtful eyes.

**H**O this, then, he had come! Ay, well—alas!  
She knew the little pattern on the brass  
As tearfully she scanned it—he had said  
(She now remembered) in his little shed,  
He, poor dead Selim, her lone worshipper,  
The tool that made it, save on gift for her,  
He ne'er would use; yes, he whose bones now lie  
Scattered upon the sand, beneath the sky,  
All except this one, this small finger-bone,

Pledge of his love which she possessed alone,  
The one cold token of his constant flame,  
Around which thoughtless beauty toiled to frame  
A ring; on whose dry whiteness beauty now  
Shed tears, pressed kisses, then with head a-bow  
Laid it within her fair grief-laden breast  
To cherish it and rock it there to rest.

**T**HE lusty sun stared fiercely from on high  
When they attained the city. The blue sky  
Was dazzling clear, save where some fine-combed clouds  
Straggled across it like the souls in shrouds  
Speeding to heaven, or travellers single file  
Moving one way, apart, suspecting guile,  
Wrapping their parching bodies from the glare  
And dusty highway. The zenana's air  
Unto the Star-of-Selim's-Heart was cool  
And comforting, as fresh from out the pool  
Of scented water on the rich divan  
She lay and o'er her waved an Indian fan  
Held by her favorite maid:—two little girls,  
The pets of the zenana, bright as pearls,  
Brought her a present which he did command,

Her lord, The-Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand,  
On her return be given her. Carelessly  
She loosed the first silk wrappings—paused—for she  
Saw now it was a noble work of art,  
Even such a love-work as some loyal heart  
Like Selim's might have given her:—she unwound  
The silk with wakened care, in thought profound;  
A triumph of beauty! he had promised sure  
Even such a gift;—alas! he had been poor.  
Each thing within his little shop was rare,  
But naught therein with such work could compare  
As this great perfume-holder—for indeed,  
Out of his poverty—from his daily need—  
He had not time, perchance, with his employ,  
But to begin for her some little toy.  
Faint murmurings were thronging in her ears,  
She gazed upon it through a mist of tears;  
Seen midst them, the entrancing graceful thing  
Seemed indistinct, gigantic, wavering.

S the tears fell she wiped them fast away;  
Then seeing more clearly, something made her lay  
Grasp on the brazen vessel, while her gaze



Grew to it all excitement and amaze—  
Then to her bosom pressed it with a sob:  
As her heart, answering with a mighty throb,  
Shook deep her being, all her shrine of hair  
Closed round the perfume-holder like a prayer!

**H**ERE—there—and there again the proof of love,  
Each scrolled and burnished strip of brass above,  
Upon each ornamental fillet's round,  
The same neat-patterned tiny whorl was found!  
The same which on his finger once, amused,  
She fastened—from the die herself had used!

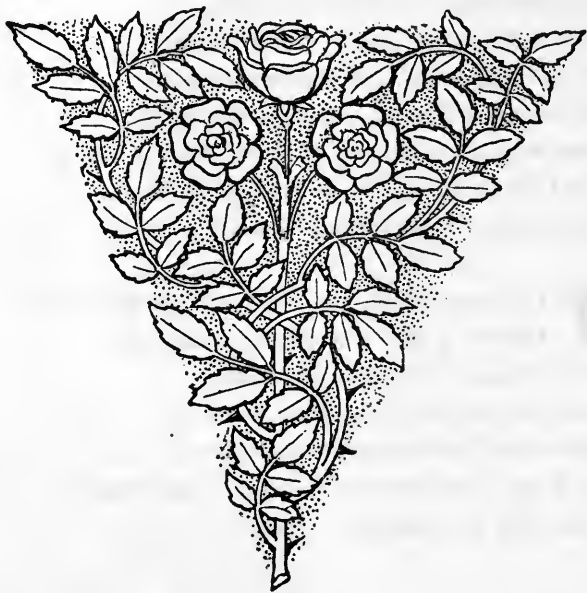
**Y**ES, Selim's gift had come to her—his love  
Had found her after death—and there above,  
Even in the far realms of bliss, new cheer  
Must come to him; had she not grown more near  
Unto his spirit though his outcast bones  
Lay bleaching on the desert's sands and stones,  
All save this finger-token? But there—look!  
Carved on the brass, his words—the open book  
Of Selim's love—the words he never said  
In life—his message to her from the dead!

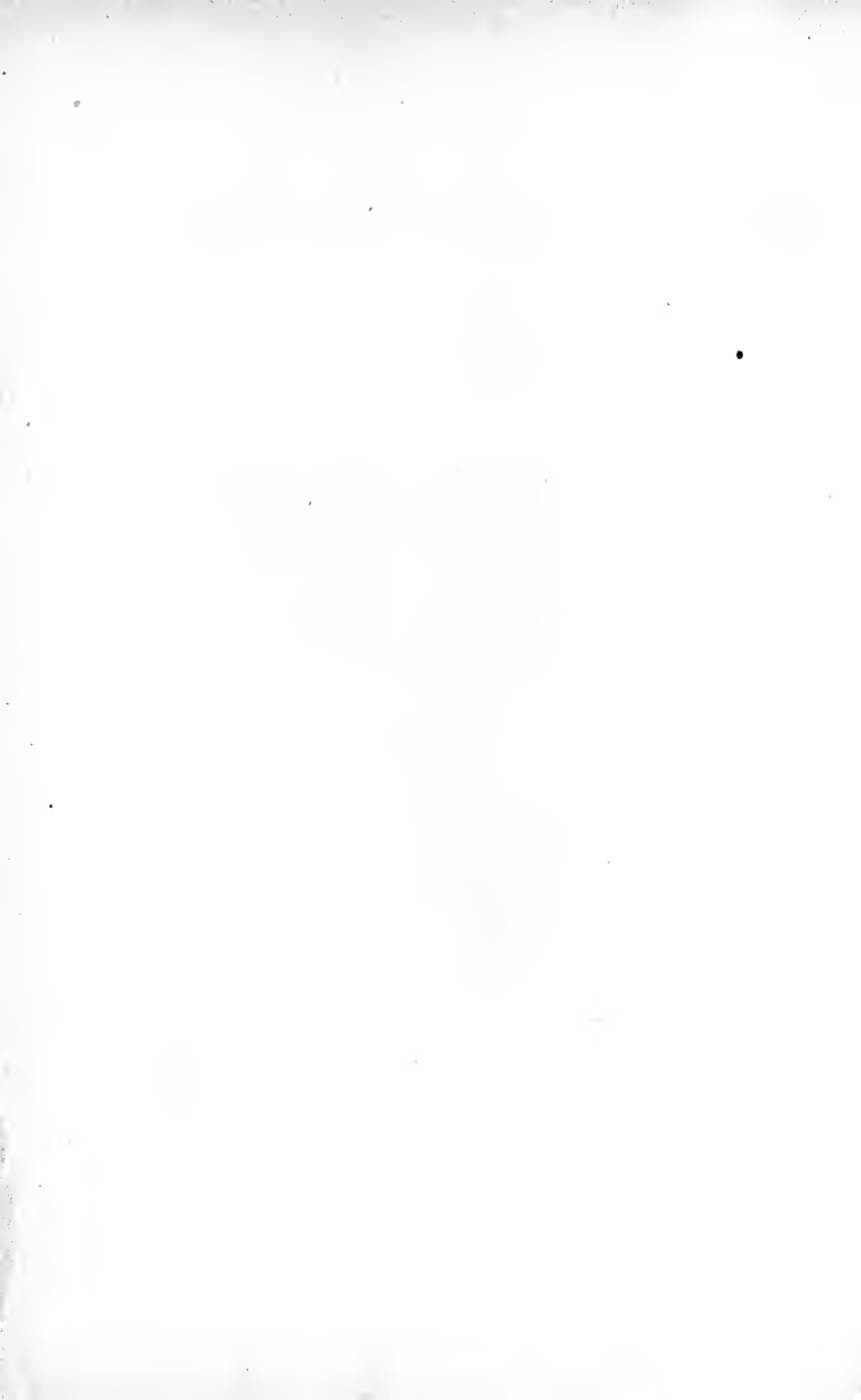
**T**HE sun that evening, from the spot the train  
Had halted when the day broke o'er the plain,  
Might then be seen soft barred with roseate streaks  
Dying away between the western peaks;  
And as he sank from view, the cooling breeze  
Of evening rustled in the breathing trees,  
But rose at night, and with persistent sweep  
A requiem along the wastes did keep,  
And as it wailed its dreary, weird refrain  
Around the hills and o'er the barren plain,  
Cast heavy handfuls of soft sand where lay  
A dead man's bones—and when the face of day  
Looked for them, lo! the desert held its trust,  
Folded forever in its shroud of dust!

**I**N that same night, the wind with plaintive sigh  
Entered a lonely cloistered turret high  
Of the zenana of a prince, and there  
Searched out a dim-lit chamber, lifted rare  
Spiced odors forth along the midnight air  
From a brass perfume-holder—such sweet breath  
As rises only at a monarch's death.

**I**N the starred duskness, pale and dreamy-eyed,  
A woman breathed the incense—watched it glide  
Out toward the desert; one hand on her breast,  
Dove-like against the quivering whiteness, pressed  
A silken case—within, a little bone  
And piece of hammered brass. . . .

*No more is known.*







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